



# That's The Limit! Drink Sensibly

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*Officially, we Indians are amongst the world's lowest consumers of alcohol, but we seem to have a way with it too. How? Over half of us are drinkers falling in the hazardous drinking category! Further, about 15-20 per cent of this lot of us go on to become addicts or develop dependency syndrome. Whether you are a responsible social drinker or an addict itself, you can't get any high on this: Alcohol is one of the most toxic substances known to man, that is readily and legally available worldwide.*

In a world of excesses, it has become impossible to know how much is too much. This applies to everything we do, be it the food we eat, the money we seek, and importantly that drink we indulge in. Well, I mean alcohol. Exhibiting bravado during drinking is commonplace. All too often, we see someone drink like a fish and yet able to stand tall amongst the less tolerant intoxicated men. Little do they realise that there is an alcoholic in the making. We hate restriction and regulation, consequently we are driven either consciously or unconsciously to override them. We like to lose control, but are inherently programmed to retain it!

Alcohol is perceived as a substance that lets you be – something that gives you the deceptive confidence to shed your inhibitions and even bring out your true self. It is argued that a small amount of alcohol is good for the heart! Excess intake brings with it a host of health and social problems. Paracelsus, the father of Toxicology said, “The dose makes the poison”. Anything done in limit is healthy but then setting an arbitrary limit that will apply to all, is difficult.

## Why Worry About Drinking?

Alcohol is one of the most toxic substances known to man, that is readily and legally available worldwide. Studies suggest that it is connected to more than 60 types of diseases and injuries. For example, alcohol is a risk factor for oesophageal cancer, liver cancer, cirrhosis of liver, stroke, and psychiatric illnesses including suicide, motor vehicle accidents and homicide.

- ◆ Alcohol intake is on the rise across the world and is becoming a major public health concern. Since the 1980's there has been a steady increase in intake in developing countries, including prevalence of drinking to intoxication.
- ◆ Officially, Indians are still among



## Counting Your Drinks?

The health authorities in UK worked on guidelines for alcohol consumption far back in 1981 itself. Very aptly, they titled it 'Drinking Sensibly'. The guidelines published in the form of a booklet detailed the definition of alcohol misuse and introduced the concept of sensible drinking. Three years later, they followed it with guidelines on individual drinking. The latter too was aptly titled 'That's the Limit!' and it outlined "safe limits" for drinking. Their follow up reports in 1995, formed the basis for quantifying alcohol volume in units and individual drinking guidelines (21 units a week for men and 14 for women). A couple of years later, these guidelines were changed from weekly limits to daily limits. A few points from the new guidelines are as follows:

- ◆ Men: 3-4 units a day or less
- ◆ Women: 2-3 units a day or less
- ◆ After an episode of heavy drinking, refrain from drinking for 48 hours to allow the body tissues to recover.

**Units are a fundamental concept used in guidelines on alcohol consumption. Approximately, one unit equals to a 25 ml measure of spirit like whisky, or half a pint of ordinary strength (4 per cent) beer, 100 ml of 10 per cent wine. Therefore, a "large" peg of whisky has 2 units; a can of regular beer has about 1.5 units; and 175 ml glass of wine contains two units.**

*(Even as we state so, we must note that alcohol consumption in Europe is now reported to be more than twice the global average and in UK it represents the biggest addiction!)*

the world's lowest consumers of alcohol—government statistics show only 21 per cent of adult men and around 2 per cent of women drink. Over half of all alcohol drinkers in India fall into the criteria for hazardous drinking. About 15-20 per cent of them will develop addiction or dependency syndrome.

- ◆ Further, there has been a rapid change in patterns and trends of alcohol use in India. People are drinking at a younger age than previously, and the average age of initiation of alcohol intake has fallen from 19 to 13 in the past two decades.
- ◆ The signature pattern of alcohol consumption is frequent and heavy drinking, with more than 90 per cent of alcohol consumption being in the form of hard liquor or distilled spirits. Worryingly, only 40 per cent of these are branded.

## The Blame Game!

Powerful international and domestic alcohol lobbies are targeting our young, says the government. There are multinationals at work trying to harvest the potential in India's vast unexploited market for investment in

production and distribution of alcohol and alcoholic products. Despite the ban on advertising alcoholic drinks, surrogate advertising is rife. The film industry glorifies drinking: Good guys drink and good times are associated with intoxication!

In recognition of the global health issues with alcoholism, the WHO kicked in 2012 by sounding out national governments on setting a global target for reducing per capita consumption of alcohol. The move seems to have hit a roadblock though. For, in April, WHO dropped it, citing poor support from member states!

But then, think! Why wait until countries and states decide on strategies for reducing alcohol consumption? Limiting individual alcohol intake and drinking sociably and sensibly is the first step towards responsible drinking. To achieve this, we must be able to quantify our drinks and understand the guidelines for alcohol intake.

Awareness about alcohol consumption and associated health hazards, as well as sensible drinking limits, may help individuals contain and reduce their intake. What is needed urgently are education and awareness programmes on the perils of alcoholism and hazardous drinking.

